

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
DISTRICT OF PUERTO RICO

MELISSA ALVARADO TORRES, et al.,

Plaintiffs,

v.

ARCOS DORADOS DE P.R. INC.,  
et al.,

Defendants.

Civil No. 11-1214 (JAF)

**OPINION AND ORDER**

Before the court is a motion by Defendants seeking costs and attorneys' fees as prevailing parties in a case brought under Title VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000 et seq.; the Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA"), 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101-12213; the Age Discrimination in Employment Act ("ADEA"), 29 U.S.C. §§ 621-634; and 42 U.S.C. § 1983. (Docket No. 84.) Each of these statutes provides that a prevailing party may recover attorneys' fees and costs. 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(k); 42 U.S.C. § 12205; 29 U.S.C. § 626(b); 42 U.S.C. § 1988. (Docket No. 84.) "Although courts are most often faced with motions for attorney's fees by prevailing plaintiffs, the statutes empower courts to grant fee requests by whichever party prevails." Tang v. State of R.I. Dept. of Elderly, 163 F.3d 7, 13 (1st Cir. 1988).

**I.**

**Background**

In this case, Plaintiffs filed a complaint on February 25, 2011, alleging a number of federal and Puerto Rico law claims. (Docket No. 1.) On May 4, 2011, Defendants filed a

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1 motion to dismiss. (Docket No. 11.) Plaintiffs requested two extensions of the time allowed  
2 to oppose the motion to dismiss. (Docket Nos. 21; 25.) On June 8, 2011, Plaintiffs then  
3 filed a “motion to withdraw voluntarily without prejudice certain of the claims,” including  
4 their claims under the Sarbanes Oxley Act, 15 U.S.C. § 7201 et seq.; Title VII; and their  
5 individual liability claims against two codefendants under the ADA and ADEA. (Docket  
6 No. 26 at 2.) Plaintiffs also filed an opposition to the motion to dismiss as to their  
7 remaining claims. (Docket No. 30.) Defendants opposed Plaintiffs’ motion to withdraw  
8 claims without prejudice. (Docket No. 32.) Defendants argued that these claims Plaintiffs  
9 sought to withdraw were baseless and should be dismissed with prejudice. (*Id.*)

10 We initially granted Plaintiffs’ motion to withdraw their claims voluntarily without  
11 prejudice. (Docket No. 66.) Defendants then filed a motion for reconsideration,  
12 reincorporating their arguments that Plaintiffs’ claims should be dismissed with prejudice.  
13 (Docket No. 69.) Persuaded by Defendants’ arguments, we granted Defendants’ motion and  
14 converted our final judgment to a dismissal with prejudice. (Docket Nos. 71; 72.) Plaintiffs  
15 filed a motion for reconsideration, which we denied. (Docket Nos. 74; 76.) Plaintiffs then  
16 appealed our decision. (Docket No. 77.) The Court of Appeals dismissed Plaintiffs’ appeal  
17 as untimely. (Docket No. 82.)

## 18 II.

### 19 Analysis

20 Defendants argue that they are entitled to attorneys’ fees for the time they spent  
21 responding to Plaintiffs’ frivolous claims. (Docket No. 84.) Specifically, Defendants argue  
22 that Plaintiffs’ § 1983, Title VII, and their individual liability claims under the ADA and  
23 ADEA were “unreasonable, frivolous, groundless, and should have never been brought by

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1 Plaintiffs in the first place. (Docket No. 84 at 2.) Defendants do not ask to be reimbursed  
2 for the time they spent responding to Plaintiffs' non-frivolous claims. See Fox v. Vice, 131  
3 S.Ct. 2205 (2011) (holding that prevailing parties may only recover fees for time spent  
4 responding to frivolous claims). Defendants do not ask to be reimbursed for Plaintiffs'  
5 remaining claims under the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, Puerto Rico employment laws, ADA, and  
6 ADEA claims against the employer, or under the federal and Puerto Rico constitutions.  
7 (Docket Nos. 1; 84.) For the reasons explained below, we deny Defendants' motion.

8 “While decisions to grant defendants fees are and should be, rare, ‘a district court  
9 may in its discretion award attorney's fees to a prevailing defendant ... upon a finding that  
10 the plaintiff's action was frivolous, unreasonable, or without foundation, even though not  
11 brought in subjective bad faith.’” Tang v. State of R.I. Dept. of Elderly, 163 F.3d 7, 13 (1st  
12 Cir. 1988) (quoting Christianburg Garment Co. v. EEOC, 434 U.S. 412, 421 (1978)). While  
13 we think that some of Plaintiffs' claims were frivolous, these frivolous claims made up a  
14 very small portion of the case. Under the Supreme Court's rule in Fox, defendants can be  
15 reimbursed “only the portion of his fees that he would not have paid but for the frivolous  
16 claim.” 131 S.Ct. at 2215.

17 We agree that Plaintiffs' claims under Title VII and § 1983 were frivolous. Title VII  
18 “makes it unlawful for an employer ‘to discharge any individual, or otherwise to  
19 discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or  
20 privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national  
21 origin.’” Morales-Cruz v. University of Puerto Rico, 676 F.3d 220, 224 (1st Cir. 2012)  
22 (quoting 42 U.S.C. § 2000e–2(a)(1)). Plaintiffs did not even allege which of these protected  
23 classes was grounding their claim. The complaint mentions age and disability

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1 discrimination, but nothing about any of the classes protected under Title VII. (Docket  
2 No. 1.) Moreover, it is well established that there is no individual liability under Title VII.  
3 Fantini v. Salem State College, 557 F.3d at 31 (1st Cir. 2009) (holding that “there is no  
4 individual employee liability under Title VII.”). We agree with Defendants that it was  
5 frivolous for Plaintiffs to file their Title VII claim despite these obvious shortcomings.

6 Next, Defendants argue that Plaintiffs’ § 1983 claim was frivolous. Again, we agree.  
7 “To make out a viable section 1983 claim, a plaintiff must show both that the conduct  
8 complained of transpired under color of state law and that a deprivation of federally secured  
9 rights ensued.” Santiago v. Puerto Rico, 655 F.3d 61, 68 (1st Cir. 2011) (citing Redondo-  
10 Borges v. U.S. Dep’t of HUD, 421 F.3d 1, 7 (1st Cir. 2005)). We have seen no plausible  
11 suggestion that these Defendants’ conduct satisfied the “under color of state law”  
12 requirement. Therefore, we find Plaintiffs’ claim under 1983 was frivolous.

13 Defendants’ arguments under the ADA and ADEA are less compelling. Defendants  
14 have cited only to district court cases for the proposition that there is no individual liability  
15 under either of these statutes. (Docket No. 84 at 4.) These cases persuasively reason why  
16 there is no individual liability under the ADA or ADEA. See Mercado v. Cooperativa de  
17 Seguros de Vida de Puerto Rico, 726 F.Supp.2d 96, 101 (D.P.R. 2010) (finding no  
18 individual liability under ADEA); Reyes-Ortiz v. McConnell Valdes, 714 F.Supp.2d 234,  
19 238 (D.P.R. 2010) (finding no individual liability under ADEA or ADA). Still, to our  
20 knowledge, this is still an “open question in the First Circuit.” Reyes-Ortiz, 714 F.Supp.2d  
21 at 238. We think that until the Court of Appeals provides an authoritative construction of  
22 the statute, it is premature to say that all arguments for individual liability under the statutes  
23 are frivolous.

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1 We must then decide whether to award fees for Defendants' work responding to  
2 Plaintiffs' frivolous claims. Under Fox, when a defendant prevails in a suit involving both  
3 frivolous and non-frivolous claims, he may be reimbursed "only the portion of his fees that  
4 he would not have paid but for the frivolous claim." 131 S.Ct. at 2215. As the Supreme  
5 Court acknowledged, this can present difficult separability issues. Id. Some of the time  
6 attorneys spend defending against frivolous claims will also serve to defend against non-  
7 frivolous claims. Id. That appears to be the case here. Defendants have submitted  
8 timesheets that describe the time they spent performing various tasks, but it is nearly  
9 impossible to tell how much of this time was devoted exclusively to Plaintiffs' frivolous  
10 claims under Title VII and § 1983. (See Docket No. 84-4.) To take one example, Plaintiffs  
11 ask to be reimbursed for time spent preparing their opposition to Plaintiffs' "motion to  
12 withdraw without prejudice." (Docket No. 84-4 at 2.) But the vast majority of the time they  
13 spent preparing this opposition would have addressed not only Plaintiffs' frivolous Title VII  
14 and 1983 claims, but also their ADA, ADEA, and Sarbanes-Oxley Act claims, which  
15 Defendants do not argue were frivolous. (See Docket No. 32.)

16 The determination of fees "should not result in a second major litigation." Fox, 131  
17 S.Ct. at 2216 (quoting Hensley v. Eckerhart, 461 U.S. 424, 433 (1983)). We must  
18 remember that the "essential goal in shifting fees (to either party) is to achieve rough justice,  
19 not achieve auditing perfection." Id. Therefore, we make a rough estimate of what portion  
20 of these fees Defendants would not have paid but for the frivolous litigation. Id. Here, we  
21 think the percentage is very small. The vast majority of the work in this case was to respond  
22 to Plaintiffs' non-frivolous claims of age and disability discrimination. We can find no  
23 entry on the timesheet that describes work that was necessary only because of Plaintiffs'

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1 frivolous claims. We also think that it would have taken very little time for Defendants to  
2 respond to Plaintiffs' claims under Title VII and 1983. A brief search on a legal database  
3 and a couple pages of text would have been sufficient to respond to these groundless claims.  
4 See Efron v. Mora Development Corp., 675 F.3d 45, 47 (1st Cir. 2012) (finding fee award  
5 not justified where only minimal work was required to respond to frivolous claims).

6 Therefore, we hereby **DENY** Defendants' request for attorneys' fees.

7 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

8 San Juan, Puerto Rico, this 30th day of January, 2013.

9 s/José Antonio Fusté  
10 JOSE ANTONIO FUSTE  
11 United States District Judge